# "It Means Possibility": Manifestations of Isolation in New Queer Cinema

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ABSTRACT      Following the cataclysmic AIDS epidemic in the 1990s, a defiant embrace of the word "queer" and new technology sparked an influx of films by independent filmmakers that were later termed "New Queer Cinema." As a product of its time, New Queer Cinema interrogates the heteronormativity it conflicts with and thus breeds a reimagining of what queer film can look like. The conflict between queer identity and its heteronormative surroundings drives distance between queer individuals and their communities, as well as larger social structures. This distance leads to a sense of isolation. This article explores themes of isolation within select New Queer Cinema films and offers a potential reference point from which we can understand queer life and cultural production in the midst of yet another global illness —COVID-19. Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) highlights isolation from heteronormative social structures, particularly the nuclear family unit. Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) focuses on a curation of queer kinship as a survival tactic in the face of this isolation. Gregg Araki's *Totally Fucked Up* (1993) and Thomas Bezucha's *Big Eden* (2000) both explore themes of self-imposed isolation. *Totally Fucked Up* provides an essential New Queer Cinema perspective of this phenomenon; meanwhile, *Big Eden* challenges assumptions that queer individuals are destined to be isolated by imagining a future in which this is not the case. Themes of isolation are essential to the New Queer Cinema genre as a product of its circumstances. Yet, it also provides a basis from which the possibilities of future queer cinema and culture can be imagined. Understanding this relationship is critical as we begin to understand the effects of structural and social isolation on the queer community as exacerbated by COVID-19.

KEYWORDS      <u>queer</u>, <u>cinema</u>, <u>isolation</u>, <u>heteronormativity</u>

We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.

—José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*[1]

Following the catastrophic AIDS epidemic, newly accessible technologies and a defiant embrace of the word "queer" sparked a proliferation of films by independent queer filmmakers—a genre later termed "New Queer Cinema" by B. Ruby Rich.[2] Rich wrote that "four elements converged to result in [New Queer Cinema]: the arrival of AIDS, Reagan, camcorders, and cheap rent."[3] The silence about the growing AIDS epidemic from Reagan's administration and fellow conservative Republicans, and their labeling of AIDS as a "gay cancer," proved to be deadly (literally and metaphorically).[4] The government's inaction and demonization of queer identity led to the deaths of thousands of queer people and the queer community's public image. The anger, exhaustion, and passion from AIDS activists, queer activists, and the larger queer community in the face of this vilification was central to the New Queer Cinema movement. With the invention of the camcorder, filmmaking became more accessible than ever and did not necessitate a Hollywood-level budget. Combined with an increase in free time thanks to cheap rent, community organizing and creative projects took on a whole new life. Video became a new, easily distributable format that AIDS activists could utilize to take control of the narrative (or lack thereof) surrounding AIDS. In her contribution to *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, Monica B. Pearl writes, "New Queer Cinema is trying to interrogate, rewrite, and reassign responsibility" just as AIDS activist videos aimed to correct misinformation spread by homophobic rhetoric.[5] Because of the time period and circumstances, the concept of a New Queer Cinema is inseparable from the AIDS epidemic from which it emerged. As Pearl writes, what is at the core of these films is that they seek to interrogate and destabilize the heteronormativity that American society is built on.[6] New Queer Cinema defies expectations of what queer life, and film, should be and presents queer reality from an unapologetic lens; in the face of both physical and social death, authenticity becomes a form of both resistance and survival.

These films prominently highlight the variety of experiences within the queer community, renounce positive representation, defy traditional film conventions, and sometimes even defy death.[7] Whether it is intercommunity conflict or the disconnect between individuals and social structures, characters in New Queer Cinema find themselves in conflict with their surroundings. This consistent friction drives a stake between these characters and their environment; the physical and emotional distance created as a result leads to a sense of isolation from both community and greater society. Such experiences of isolation are especially prevalent for queer individuals, both on and off the screen, as queer individuals have historically been pushed to the fringes of society.

Isolation is an ever-present reality of queer life—we are continually isolated from our blood families, the legal system, the medical system, and other aspects of social and cultural life. New Queer Cinema exists as the queer community's reaction to this isolation during the nineties, but its existence as a cultural product is no doubt relevant today. Not only are

remnants of New Queer Cinema and the AIDS epidemic present in contemporary queer culture, but New Queer Cinema as a cultural response to sociopolitical context is, and will be, mirrored in the production of intra-COVID queer culture. Academics are already publishing on the numerous parallels between the AIDS epidemic and the COVID-19 pandemic: enforced social isolation, exacerbation of existing prejudices against minority groups, and the politicization of an illness that is nondiscriminatory. Work has also been published on the connections between COVID, queer identity, and isolation; queer activist efforts amidst COVID; and further connections between AIDS and Monkeypox.[8] If we are to understand the effects of structural and social isolation on the queer community as exacerbated by global illness, we can start by looking back on the role isolation plays in New Queer Cinema.

Through an analysis of how queer characters in these films contend with isolation as individuals and as a community, this article highlights the relationship between these themes and New Queer Cinema. I focus my analysis on four films: Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), Gregg Araki's *Totally Fucked Up* (1993), and Thomas Bezucha's *Big Eden* (2000). New Queer Cinema exists as a rich canon with numerous films that frequently transcend time, space, and form. While themes of isolation are prevalent within the entire genre,[9] these films were chosen due to the range of experiences they explore in an effort to survey the intersectionalities found within New Queer Cinema. I also posit New Queer Cinema as a product of its time and consider possible futures of queer cinema through analysis of *Big Eden*. *Big Eden* marks a turning point for Western queer film. Not only was the film released right at the turn of the century, but it straddles the line between New Queer Cinema and contemporary queer film. Where it mimics the heterosexual romantic-comedy genre in style, it refuses to engage with homophobia in any capacity; it queers the small town, but conventional family structures are at the heart of the film; the main character struggles with his identity, but the film remains hopeful and illustrates a future where queer people exist. *Big Eden* is a (queer) response to New Queer Cinema at the turn of the century and maps a trajectory for contemporary queer film and culture.

By returning to New Queer Cinema to understand the effects of isolation during an epidemic, this article contributes to the field of cultural studies by providing an avenue through which we can understand queer life during COVID-19. Understanding the location of queer culture within its sociopolitical and historical contexts is critical as cultural studies scholars turn their attention toward contemporary intra-COVID queer cultural productions. Queer culture exists as a response to sociopolitical aspects of queer people's everyday lives; by understanding queer culture as an extension of everyday life, I explore how New Queer Cinema, as produced by queer people, contends with the role of isolation in their lives. While the New Queer Cinema genre is international and benefits from a wide variety

of perspectives, this article centers on American films to both narrow the scope and to understand queer American life through a creative, self-representational lens. More specifically, this article centers textual and visual analysis of fictionalized films from the 1990s as well as one from 2000. While there are many documentary-style films essential to the New Queer Cinema canon (e.g., *Paris is Burning*), fictionalized films provide an avenue to creatively explore the realities of queer life and possibilities for the future. Filmmakers have full control over their film (the narrative, script, filming techniques, etc.) and the themes they portray. Textual and visual analysis of cinematic storytelling must be undertaken in combination with each other to address the story, characters, thematic elements, and broader cultural attitudes. By doing so, I gain a well-rounded perspective of the scene and the context in which it—and the filmmaker—is engaging with our culture.

For the purposes of this article, I use the word "queer" to refer to any behavior, attitudes, or existences that are labeled as non-normative, including but not limited to those who are non-cisgender and/or non-heterosexual; this broad definition is utilized in an effort to recognize the ways in which such behaviors challenge heteronormativity. Within this article I also delineate between the terms "isolation" and "loneliness." I define "isolation" as a chronic separation between a minoritized individual and others, whether this separation is between an individual and community or larger societal structures. For "loneliness" I refer to queer theorist Rob Cover's work, utilizing his definition: "a painful, affective disengagement with relationality."[10] Loneliness, then, functions as a feeling, while isolation functions as both a feeling and as a systemic problem.[11]

Tensions resulting from the separation between queer culture and hegemonic societal structures are everyday realities for queer individuals, meaning that loneliness and isolation closely follow for the queer subject. In New Queer Cinema, three key themes emerge to mark this tension and separation. I first turn to isolation from heteronormativity to explore the disconnect between queer identity and heteronormative societal structures. Analysis of the traditional family unit as portrayed in *My Own Private Idaho* begins to unpack this theme. I further examine queer kinship as a survival tactic in the face of this isolation. The creation of and yearning for queer community in *The Watermelon Woman* highlights the connection between isolation and kinship curation for queer individuals. I later examine self-imposed isolation as an effort to protect the self from expected harm resulting from heteronormativity. Scenes from Araki's *Totally Fucked Up* provide an essential New Queer Cinema perspective of this phenomenon. Meanwhile, Bezucha's *Big Eden* takes an alternative approach, mapping alternative queer futures and signaling a turn away from New Queer Cinema.

# Isolation From Heteronormativity in *My Own Private Idaho*

Gus Van Sant's 1991 film *My Own Private Idaho* combines a loose retelling of Shakespeare's *Henry IV* and *Henry V* with an avant-garde filmmaking style. The film follows two young men, Mike Waters (played by River Phoenix) and Scott Favor (played by Keanu Reeves), each on their own journeys of self-discovery. Mike, a street hustler, yearns to find his mother and uses his money from hustling to help him on his journey; Scott, one of his best friends, is the son of the Portland mayor and hustles for money. The film portrays a life of hustling, drugs, squatting, and other "deviant" activities not applauded by larger society —aspects of life which are at the center of the New Queer Cinema movement. In a recent interview, Van Sant reflects on GLAAD's reaction to the film when it came out:[12] "GLAAD thought they wanted images that made gay people look normal, as opposed to not normal. And this was not making them look normal, as far as it relates to straight society."[13] Van Sant's remarks highlight how normalcy and heterosexuality become equated with one another as GLAAD pushed for portrayals of queer individuals to mimic heterosexual life. In contrast, *My Own Private Idaho* does not mimic heteronormative approaches to life; rather, it indicates the sharp divide between heteronormative society and queer culture. The characters effectively create what queer theorist Michael Warner refers to as a "counterpublic," which he defines as a "scheme where a dominated group aspires to re-create itself as a public and in doing so finds itself in conflict not only with the dominant social group but with the norms that constitute the dominant culture as a public."[14] Queer community and existence in *My Own Private Idaho* is shown as being intrinsically contradictory to and isolated from heterosexual-dominated culture. These characters represent lives of those on the fringes of American society as they create their own counterpublic and cultivate kinship with one another as a result of marginalization, effectively forming their own familial structure separate from a heteronormative one. One scene of *My Own Private Idaho* portrays this isolation from heteronormativity, both literally and metaphorically, through exploration of familial tensions.

For Scott, his contentious relationship with his father is a key force in his life. Given that his father (Jack) is the mayor of Portland, Oregon, Scott has even more expectations placed on him than others, since his actions affect his father's social status as well. During one point in the film, Jack sends police officers to track Scott down, where they find him in an abandoned warehouse with squatters, drug addicts, hustlers, and others marked as socially deviant. After chasing other inhabitants through the house, they find Scott sexually engaging with Mike. Without acknowledging Scott and Mike's sexual intimacy, the police inform Scott that his father wants to see him. Scott tells them to go away, but then the camera cuts to the next scene where we see Scott standing in front of his father. The two

of them are alone in Jack's office staring at each other from different sides of the room. Jack sits in his wheelchair at his desk, dressed sharply in a suit with his hair gelled back. In contrast, Scott stands on the other side of the desk, shirtless except for a dark jean jacket stained with bleach. His hair is unkempt and a black collar adorns his neck. The visual contrast of this scene alone portrays Scott's alienation from the family unit as something physical that prevents them from connecting—e.g., their attire is visibly different; they are standing far apart; and they have a physical object (the desk) between them. This physical separation is indicative of a more emotional and social disconnect apparent in their dialogue to each other. After staring at Scott for a minute, Jack remarks:

I don't know whether it's God trying to get back at me for something I have done, but your passing through life makes me certain that you are marked. That heaven is punishing me for my mistreatings. . . . I thought, by my soul [your cousin] has more worthy interest to my estate than you could hold a candle to. . . And then I have to think of you. And what a degenerate you are.[15]

Scott's queer behavior, exemplified by him sleeping with men for money and hanging around others marked as socially deviant, labels him a "degenerate" in the eyes of his father. In contrast, Scott's cousin, who has been working to support his family on their farm, is more the ideal son that Jack wishes Scott was—one who conforms to heteronormativity. Scott's identity resists heteronormativity as his priorities differ from those expected of him, both productive (i.e., his disinterest in working in the political sphere) and reproductive (i.e., his frequent homosexual activity). This difference in priorities and lifestyles separates him from both larger society and the patriarch of his immediate family unit. He does not conform to what his father wants him to be, and thus he is branded a "degenerate" as his father aims to shame him into conformity.

Initially, Scott denies any implication that he or his activities are reprobate; his first words in response are, "Don't think that, father. You will find out it's not true. And I hope that somebody forgives the people that have swayed your fond thoughts away from me."[16] The "people" that Scott refers to who have swayed his father's thoughts are representative of heteronormativity, implying that heteronormativity is an outside source that has influenced his father to turn against him. Here, there is also an implication that Jack is not at fault for his demonization of his son's actions. Scott's internalized heteronormativity leads him to make excuses for his father's thoughts and actions, rather than reprimand him. After responding to his father, Scott crosses the room and walks around the desk, taking a knee in front of his father and giving him a hug. This traversal of the barrier between them signals the start of Scott's conformity to his father's expectations. This internalized heteronormativity related to his father's expectations proves to be a recurring theme in Scott's journey through the film. He eventually conforms to these expectations and leaves

behind Mike and the others to embrace his life within the political sphere. For Mike, this is a profound betrayal of queer kinship. The two of them had formed an especially close bond during their time together, and as Mike was largely on his own, Scott was a part of Mike's family. In contrast, Scott did not fully understand the bond of queer kinship and did not integrate Mike into his family. Scott's class mobility and blood ties allowed him to fall back into his safety net and return to the political sphere, while Mike was left to pick up the pieces of his life alone.

Scott's relationship with his father is symbolic of not only the divide between queer culture and the traditional family structure, but heteronormativity more generally. In *Queer Phenomenology,* Sara Ahmed writes that, "identification with the father (the wish for his love) becomes an allegiance to the form of the family."[17] Since the father is the head of the household in patriarchal society, the father also becomes the figurehead for the nuclear, heterosexual family structure; thus, Scott's betrayal of Mike, and the queer kinship he had built with him, is an expression of conformity to "the family" as a heteronormative construct. His rejection of queer kinship perpetuates the divide between queer culture and heteronormative society—as exemplified by the familial unit—and how queer individuals are isolated from our immediate surroundings, social connectivity, and societal constructs.

## *The Watermelon Woman*'s Queer Kinship as a Survival Tactic

In contrast to the rejection of queer kinship within *My Own Private Idaho*, Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* embraces queer kinship. As the writer, director, and primary actor of the film, Dunye portrays her own existence and experiences as a Black lesbian. The main character, Cheryl, is not only Dunye's namesake, but is played by Dunye herself, effectively blurring the lines between the film's character and filmmaker. Dunye has written on this lack of separation: "[*The Watermelon Woman* is] about me. It's about my community. I wanted to put people in the film that I saw in my world."[18] *The Watermelon Woman* not only explores this search for queer kinship through Cheryl's journey within the film, but it also serves as a meta-narrative for Dunye's own journey in wanting to see her community represented on screen. While the plot of the film portrays the formation of what Michael Warner would call a queer counterpublic, the existence of the film itself also serves as a testimony to queer counterpublics. Dunye portrays her own personal experiences with queer counterpublic culture on screen. Her desire to see her community on film also functions as a form of retaliation against isolation, particularly historical and cultural isolation. The film's portrayal of both modern and historical Black lesbian existence both highlights and combats this isolation.

The film follows Cheryl, a young, Black lesbian filmmaker who spends her days working at a video store and makes films on the side. She works alongside her best friend Tamara, who is also a Black lesbian. They frequently spend their shifts talking rather than working, with Tamara lamenting over her relationship troubles and Cheryl discussing her progress on her current film project. Within the film, we see two different forms of queer kinship emerge: kinship with lesbians Cheryl knows personally and historical kinship. Cheryl has established connections to other Black lesbians, including Tamara, Tamara's girlfriend, and another woman Cheryl briefly dates. Cheryl is also connected to one of her and Tamara's coworkers—a young white girl who is presumed to be queer in some fashion—and Diana, a white customer that Cheryl ends up dating for part of the film. Tamara frequently criticizes Cheryl's relationship with Diana, calling her Cheryl's "wannabe Black girlfriend."[19] Tamara's attitude toward Diana marks a distinction between generalized notions of lesbian kinship and Black lesbian kinship. As a white lesbian, Diana cannot understand the shared experience of being both Black and a lesbian. While Cheryl herself brushes off these comments, the film further revolves around a second form of kinship that crosses time and space. Cheryl explores this form of kinship through a film project in which she researches a Black lesbian from the early twentieth century.

After watching films from the 1930s and 1940s that featured Black actresses, all of whom are uncredited, Cheryl becomes enamored with one actress who she dubs "The Watermelon Woman." Determined to find out her name, Cheryl embarks on a journey through archives and community connections to find out more information about this woman. Throughout her search, she comes across various roadblocks. For instance, she finds nothing in the library and, after asking random people on the street, no one has any information on the actress. Eventually, her search leads her to a friend of a friend, Lee Edwards, who has a private collection of items related to Black film. Lee's collection takes up most of the space in his house with posters hung on his walls and rooms filled with memorabilia. While not necessarily a collection of queer Black artifacts, Lee's collection brings up another aspect of isolation—a form of isolation that marginalized or underrepresented groups experience from their exclusion from history. Often such histories are not institutionally preserved, or, in the case of "The Watermelon Woman," her existence is not considered historically significant. The character of Lee Edwards has curated this collection as a form of archive not found elsewhere. Even with this collection, he is unable to help Cheryl find more information about her "Watermelon Woman"; however, his artifacts provide Cheryl with context of the time in which "The Watermelon Woman" lived.

After digging through some of her mom's files, Cheryl meets with a woman named Shirley who is finally able to name "The Watermelon Woman": Fae Richards. After researching Fae, Cheryl discovers that she was a lesbian as well. Due to her unpopularity and lower social status as a Black lesbian, Fae's life has failed to be recorded. She is only survived by those

who knew her. Cheryl's commitment to telling Fae's story only grows as she finds out more about her life. Dedicated to sharing Fae's history, Cheryl gives a voice to older Black lesbians who had been excluded from history books. Cheryl's journey leads her to a woman named June Walker, a Black woman who had been Fae's lover for two decades. June is unable to meet with Cheryl but writes her a letter. In it, she writes, "Please, Cheryl, make our history before we are all dead and gone. But if you are really in the [Black lesbian] family, you better understand that our family will always only have each other."[20] June's words convey a desperate desire for Black lesbian history to be recorded and preserved, but also acknowledge the fact that they have been historically isolated and left behind. By telling the story of Fae Richards, Cheryl embraces a form of queer kinship that transcends time and space, cementing Fae's history amongst everyone else and Cheryl's Black lesbian existence alongside her. Near the end of the film, Cheryl provides a monologue while looking into the camera:

What [Fae Richards] means to me, a 25-year-old Black woman, means something else [than what she meant to those who knew her]. It means hope. It means inspiration. It means possibility. It means history. And most importantly, what I understand, is that I'm going to be the one who says, "I am a Black lesbian filmmaker who's just beginning." But I'm going to say it a lot more and have a lot more work to do.[21]

Fae Richard's existence as a Black lesbian in history provides Cheryl with an anchor to which she can tie her own existence. Knowing her Black lesbian identity does not exist in isolation from others, but is rather in dialogue with other Black lesbians across different generations, alleviates Cheryl's feelings of historical erasure and loneliness due to lack of representation. Archives of queer lives and histories function as a "theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record of queer activity."[22] The queer archive, then, forms from the ways in which queer counterpublics, and the kinship that forms within them, destabilize the heteronormative structuring of history and time. Queer culture, in this context, takes control of the narrative and creates its own archives to combat historical isolation and preserve its own history, place in time, and ways of existing in the world.

## Self-Imposed Isolation in *Totally Fucked Up* and *Big Eden*

Social, cultural, and historical isolation is frequently omnipresent in queer lives, often so prevalent that it is believed to be normal or expected. As a result, preemptive action becomes a form of control and self-defense for the queer individual as they try to protect

themselves and their community. As a staple of queer life, self-imposed isolation is prominent within New Queer Cinema, as seen in *Totally Fucked Up* and *Big Eden*.

Like Cheryl Dunye, filmmaker Gregg Araki was a key player that helped shape the genre of New Queer Cinema. His Teen Apocalypse Trilogy of films dove deep into the lives and minds of queer teenagers in the nineties, and were marked by the uncertainty of the future and the sociopolitical climate of the time.[23] The trilogy is "a trifecta of teen alienation, hazy sexuality and aggression," embodying the heart of New Queer Cinema.[24] *Totally Fucked Up*, the first film of the trilogy, follows the lives of a friend group made up of six teenagers: four gay men and two lesbian women. The film plays out in fifteen chapters with each presenting a gritty slice of their lives. In each chapter, we see them participating in a variety of activities that include doing drugs in an empty parking garage, wandering malls, having sex, arguing, and giving interviews to Steven (a member of the friend group) about their thoughts on different themes that emerge in their lives.

Throughout the film, the group is shown to have formed their own kinship with one another. Such connection is an example of a queer counterpublic operating in what Jack Halberstam calls "queer time" and "queer space."[25] As a group, their own version of culture is markedly different from that of larger society while they also reconstruct the temporal and spatial conceptions of family. For example, despite their young age, Michele and Patricia (the lesbian couple in the group) wish to become parents. They ask their friends to donate sperm, which they then all mix together and attempt to artificially inseminate Patricia, effectively reimagining what the traditional lifecycle and family look like.[26] Despite this found family that emerges, we see themes of isolation that are not just culturally imposed, but self-imposed as well. For Andy, one of the central characters, he still feels like an outcast despite being a part of the group. At the very beginning of the film, it is Andy whose line references the title when he states, "I guess you could say I'm totally fucked up."[27] His reference to "you" situates himself as distant from the audience, positioning us as outsiders looking in on his life and the lives of his friends. Andy's character development throughout the film centers around his relationship to the concept of love. After meeting at a club, Andy starts to date someone named Ian, a relationship that Andy's friends quickly remark is more serious than Andy's previous relationships.[28] Andy heads over to Ian's place late at night wanting to talk. When Andy asks to be let in, Ian blocks the door and declines, implying that he has someone else over who he is having sex with. Feeling upset, Andy tells Ian not to call and storms off to head back to his place. Later, Andy finds himself alone and grappling with the upset of his breakup, angry at both Ian for cheating and himself for becoming so invested. Seeking consolation, he attempts to reach out to his friends, calling them one by one. Yet, none of them answer since they are either busy or already on the phone with each other. This disconnection from his support system serves as the impetus

for his suicide; he slams the phone on the ground angrily and poisons himself before stumbling into a pool where he drowns.

The loneliness Andy feels is effectively what Rob Cover calls a "momentary unliveability in which the logic of suicide is understood as [the] only solution."[29] Andy's suicide is what *Totally Fucked Up* builds up to and what is at the core of the Teen Apocalypse Trilogy— alienation. While Andy's suicide was sparked by his momentary disconnect from his peers, it is also more than that. He felt disconnected from his friends, ex-boyfriend, and peers, which symbolizes the isolation felt between queer individuals and larger society (e.g., community) as well as heteronormative structures (e.g., love from "traditional" romantic relationships). Near the beginning of the film, as the group are all sharing their thoughts on love to the camera, Andy remarks, "Love does not exist."[30] From the start of the film, Andy situates himself in opposition to love, criticizing a heteronormative version of love that promotes monogamy with an emphasis on romance, commitment, and sex. He takes his breakup with Ian as proof that heteronormative conceptualizations of love do not exist and extrapolates that to encompass all forms of love. Despite having tangible connections to others, the distance between Andy and this conceptualization of love symbolizes a chronic separation between queer identity and heteronormativity. Andy's feelings regarding this conflict, fueled by the momentary disconnection between him and his peers, leads Andy toward a physical death stemming from social death. In the face of these forms of external isolation, Andy feels as though suicide is the final, logical step resulting from this externally imposed isolation. This extreme form of isolation imposed by external forces effectively bridges the gap between external and internal. In the moment, Andy believes that taking control of his situation and isolating himself via death will protect himself from future pain. His suicide is an act of self-defense, preemptively saving himself from seemingly inevitable, existential pain.[31] This experience of self-imposed isolation as a protective measure *against* isolation and loneliness is indeed somewhat cyclical; however, the self-imposition gives a sense of agency to the individual and allows them to take control of their situation and save themselves from (expected) harm, regardless of whether these expectations are grounded in reality.

In the early 2000s, we start to see a turn away from New Queer Cinema. The impact of New Queer Cinema is undeniable, as its influence remains in more modern and mainstream films such as Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* (2016). Yet, overall attitudes carried in queer film began to shift from one of embracing nonconformity to one that is more mainstream; the teen coming-of-age genre especially sees more and more queer films each year, such as *Love, Simon* (2018), *Booksmart* (2019), and *The Half of It* (2020).[32] Thomas Bezucha's *Big Eden* is an early example of this shift. *Big Eden* acknowledges and integrates elements of New Queer Cinema while diverting and

optimistically mapping a future of queer culture; the film challenges heteronormativity by pondering a queer future in which it does not exist at all.

*Big Eden* was Bezucha's first major film. Both written and directed by Bezucha, the film and its cast won awards at multiple LGBTQ film festivals in 2000 and 2001. *Big Eden* is a romantic drama-comedy about a gay main character, Henry Hart, and his hometown of Big Eden, Montana. Following his grandfather having a stroke, Henry leaves his life in New York City to fly back to Big Eden to care for him. While caring for his only living relative, Henry reunites with old family friends from his youth, who comment that he has not visited in a long time. Being back in his hometown, Henry must grapple with his unresolved feelings for his high school crush, Dean, who has also recently moved back to town after divorcing his wife. Between juggling his feelings for Dean and caretaking for his ill grandfather, Henry is oblivious to the fact that the shy general store owner, Pike, is pining for him. Henry also does his best to conceal that he is gay as he has not yet come out to his grandfather. Much of the humor of the film takes shape around everyone knowing Henry is gay, but not telling him it is something he needs to hide. Henry keeps waiting for homophobic encounters that never come.

The film is notable for the fact that it does not feature any explicit homophobic activity or comments at all; Henry and the audience produce all such expectations. The film plays with assumptions around small, rural town life. As we, the audience, are exposed to Henry's background of having grown up in a tiny town in the middle of Montana, we assume his community will not accept him. Adding to this assumption is Henry's decision to move to New York and his rare visits back home. When Henry does move back, his secrecy around his sexuality implies there is a dangerous reason as to why he will not let himself be known. After Henry has been in Big Eden for months and has started fitting into the community, he decides he is ready to go back to New York. This comes as a shock to the other members of the community and they all protest to him leaving. During a conversation with an old family friend, Grace Cornwell, she asks why he is leaving, to which Henry replies:

I live in New York . . . I'm like a whole person there. You wouldn't even recognize me. I've got a really nice apartment. A really, really, nice apartment. I make a lot of money. I've got friends there. Good friends. They have restaurants there. . . . I've got to go back.[33]

Grace, however, is having none of his excuses, and tries to beg him to stay:

You know what they say when you get lost in the woods? If you stay put, stay in one place and don't wander, they'll find you. And I was just hoping you'd let yourself be found this time. I was hoping you'd let us find you. But you keep wandering, and we can't.[34]

Henry has internalized so much of the rhetoric pushed on queer people. He assumes that queer folks are meant to be isolated and alone. He also assumes that rural areas are inherently more conservative and, as a result, queer people turn to large cities to find solace and refuge once we have moved away from our hometowns. *Big Eden* counters these dominant narratives through a film built on love and acceptance, rejecting the notion that homophobia is in any way a requirement for queer existence or an inherent part of how we tell our stories.

In some ways, *Big Eden* is part of the New Queer Cinema canon; it destabilizes the heteronormativity of the rural landscape and *queers* the small town, effectively taking control of a narrative so often used against queer people. However, the film also signals a turn away from New Queer Cinema attitudes. Through this control of the narrative, it imagines a future in which queer narratives and individuals are allowed to exist and thrive without homophobia. It challenges the conceptualization of queer community as a counterpublic and instead proposes a new form of public in which heteronormative assumptions do not exist. New Queer Cinema was built around the isolation produced by heteronormativity; but *Big Eden* challenges these conceptions, telling us that we can not just imagine better lives, but deserve a life surrounded by love and support—a life that exists in contrast to the isolated ones described in previous New Queer Cinema films.

# Conclusion

In considering a future beyond New Queer Cinema, I find myself returning again and again to a line Cheryl says near the end of *The Watermelon Woman*: "[The life of Fae Richards] means hope. It means inspiration. It means possibility."[35] Visualizations of queer narratives provide a platform through which we can explore our own experiences and reimagine the possibilities of what queer existence can look like. Cheryl's newfound understanding of Fae Richards, a fellow Black lesbian, provides her with a context through which she can better understand and conceptualize herself and her community. New Queer Cinema, as a genre and movement, explores themes of isolation and loneliness because they are realities of queer existence; it is a record of the time and space in which it emerged, but it also continues to expand upon the infinite possibilities of queer representation, experiences, and futurities.

Emboldened by the ongoing AIDS epidemic, political landscape, and newly available filmmaking technologies, queer filmmakers of the 1990s forged a New Queer Cinema canon that challenges not just conventional filmmaking practices, but the heteronormativity of American society as well. Facing both physical and social death, New Queer Cinema

filmmakers unapologetically embraced authenticity by portraying the unfiltered realities of queer life, while also remaining in tension with the heteronormative public that surrounds it.

The isolation and the loneliness that results from this conflict is essential to the New Queer Cinema movement. Gus Van Sant's 1991 film *My Own Private Idaho* explicitly articulates this isolation from heteronormativity through the character of Scott. Scott's allegiance to his father (i.e., his blood family) over Mike (i.e., his chosen family) symbolizes a dedication to the nuclear family structure and reinscription of queer culture's isolation in both material and conceptual ways. Systemic isolation of queer individuals leads to a sense of loneliness and yearning for social connectivity as seen in Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman*. Dunye's character Cheryl searches for information about the fictional actress Fae Richards, longing for the kinship of fellow Black lesbians. By constructing an archive of Black lesbian existence, Cheryl combats loneliness resulting from historical isolation. Additionally, the isolation experienced by queer people is often so pervasive that it becomes internalized, even when it is unfounded. The character of Andy in Gregg Araki's film *Totally Fucked Up* experiences isolation from heteronormative constructs as well as queer community. This feeling of loneliness serves as the catalyst for his suicide, a seemingly ultimate form of isolation. In a similar vein, the central character of Henry in Thomas Bezucha's film *Big Eden* internalizes the belief that queer individuals are meant to be isolated. While in his rural hometown, Henry tries to remain in the closet despite all his friends and family being supportive. Themes of isolation and loneliness within these films are not just essential to the New Queer Cinema movement, but also reflect lived realities of queer individuals—lives and experiences that challenge heteronormativity.

Where *Big Eden* differs from the rest of these films, however, is that it seeks to dramatically reimagine what queer futures can look like. By not having any linguistic or visual depictions of violence and emphasizing community as a support system for queer characters, *Big Eden* challenges heteronormative assumptions that small, rural spaces are rife with homophobia and only inhabitable by queers if they remain isolated. Rather, the town of Big Eden exists as a community that queers rurality, while suggesting a future—or an alternate version of the present—in which all community members are considered essential and integral to the community's well-being. *Big Eden* serves as a cultural marker for the turn away from New Queer Cinema and provides an alternative, optimistic response to isolation compared to previous New Queer Cinema films.

This article has sought to bridge the gap in research on the intersections between queer identity, cinema, and isolation. Through an analysis of select New Queer Cinema films, I explored the ways isolation and loneliness not only manifest in the genre, but also the way they reflect queer realities. Understanding the relationship between queer life, isolation, and cultural products is vital as queer communities continue to be resilient in the face of

the COVID-19 pandemic and Monkeypox virus. There are many opportunities for future research at the intersection of these themes. The relationship between queer representation in children's media and social connectivity amongst queer youth is a particularly timely topic following an exponential increase in representation and Republican retaliation.[36] There is also room to expand upon how the themes of isolation reflect the queer lived experiences in cinematic and literary cultural productions created during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond as we grapple with the fallout. If there is one consideration to take away from any queer work, whether it is film or scholarly research, it is possibility. Queerness itself exists as infinite possibilities as it allows for representations beyond our own experiences. As such, it gestures toward a future defined not by what queerness *does* mean, but what it *can* mean.

# Notes

1. José Esteban Muñoz, "Introduction: Feeling Utopia," in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1. ↵

2. Michele Aaron, "New Queer Cinema: An Introduction," in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michele Aaron (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 3–14, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvxcrw2f < https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvxcrw2f> ; Monica B. Pearl, "AIDS and New Queer Cinema," in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michele Aaron (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 23–35, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvxcrw2f < https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvxcrw2f> ; B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11hpp0s < https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11hpp0s> . ↵

3. Rich, *New Queer Cinema*, xv–xvi. ↵

4. See Joseph Bennington-Castro, "How AIDS Remained an Unspoken—But Deadly—Epidemic for Years," *HISTORY*, June 1, 2020, https://www.history.com/news/aids-epidemic-ronald-reagan < https://www.history.com/news/aids-epidemic-ronald-reagan> for more information on this topic. ↵

5. Pearl, "AIDS and New Queer Cinema," 29. ↵

6. "Heteronormativity" is defined as the belief that heterosexuality is normal and expected; this relates to the ways society conceptualizes constructs such as sexuality, gender, and family. For a thorough definition, see American Psychological Association, "Heteronormativity," in *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, accessed November 7, 2021, https://dictionary.apa.org/heteronormativity. ↵

7. Aaron, "New Queer Cinema: An Introduction." ↵

8. Timothy Gitzen, "Viral Living," *Social Anthropology* 28, no. 2 (May 2020): 271–72, https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12849 < https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12849> ; Michelle Forrest and Phillip Joy, "Out of the Closet and into Quarantine: Stories of Isolation and Teaching," *Atlantis* 42, no. 1 (September 30, 2021): 31–46, https://doi.org/10.7202/1082014ar < https://doi.org/10.7202/1082014ar> ; Rachel M. Schmitz et al., "Queer Politics of a Pandemic: LGBTQ + People's Conceptions of COVID-19's Politicization," *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, April 18, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-022-00719-6 < https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-022-00719-6> ; Sara Paparini et al., "Public Understanding and Awareness of and Response to Monkeypox Virus Outbreak: A Cross-sectional Survey of the Most Affected Communities in the United Kingdom during the 2022 Public Health Emergency," *HIV*

*Medicine*, November 16, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1111/hiv.13430 < https://doi.org/10.1111/hiv.13430> . ↵

9. Numerous New Queer Cinema films highlight these themes. For instance, isolation from heteronormativity is prevalent in John Cameron Mitchell's *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001) just as queer kinship underscores the character development in Harry Dodge and Silas Howard's *By Hook or by Crook* (2001). Furthermore, self-imposed isolation is a key part of the plot in Michael Mayer's *A Home at the End of the World* (2004). ↵

10. Rob Cover, "Isolated and Suicidal: Critically Assessing the Persistent Stereotype of Queer Youth as Isolated and Lonely on a Pathway to the Big City," in *Narratives of Loneliness: Multidisciplinary Perspectives from the 21st Century*, ed. Olivia Sagan and Eric D. Miller (London; New York: Routledge, 2017), 193, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315645582-17 < https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315645582-17> . ↵

11. It is important to note that isolation and loneliness are not mutually exclusive. This article focuses on isolation as a systemic issue, but as it and loneliness have significant overlap, I find it imperative to define both. ↵

12. GLAAD is an organization that protests defamatory media content of LGBTQ people. The acronym originally stood for "Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation," but the organization has since broadened that scope to the wider queer community. ↵

13. Jake Indiana, "Gus Van Sant Reflects on 30 Years of 'My Own Private Idaho,'" *Highsnobiety*, October 11, 2021, https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/gus-van-sant-interview-my-own-private-idaho < https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/gus-van-sant-interview-my-own-private-idaho> . ↵

14. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 112, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1qgnqj8 < https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1qgnqj8> . ↵

15. Gus Van Sant, *My Own Private Idaho* (New Line Cinema, 1991), 46:38. ↵

16. Van Sant, *My Own Private Idaho*, 47:28. ↵

17. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 73, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822388074 < https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822388074> . ↵

18. Pendarvis Harshaw, "Reel Talk: Cheryl Dunye on Inventing a Film Genre," *KQED*, March 26, 2021, https://www.kqed.org/arts/13894145/rightnowish-reel-talk-cheryl-dunye < https://www.kqed.org/arts/13894145/rightnowish-reel-talk-cheryl-dunye> . ↵

19. Cheryl Dunye, *The Watermelon Woman* (Dancing Girl Productions, 1996), 54:45. ↵

20. Dunye, *Watermelon Woman,* 1:12:39. ↵

21. Dunye, *Watermelon Woman,* 1:14:14. ↵

22. J. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 169–70. ↵

23. The trilogy is made up of *Totally Fucked Up* (1993), *The Doom Generation* (1995), and *Nowhere* (1997). Eugene Hernandez, "5 Questions for Gregg Araki, Writer/Director of 'Totally Fucked Up,'" *IndieWire* (blog), July 1, 2005, https://www.indiewire.com/2005/07/5-questions-for-gregg-araki-writerdirector-of-totally-fucked-up-78155 < https://www.indiewire.com/2005/07/5-questions-for-gregg-araki-writerdirector-of-totally-fucked-up-78155> . ↵

24. Ryan O'Connell, "The Work of Gregg Araki: Teenagers, Aliens and Shoegaze," *Thought Catalog* (blog), January 31, 2011, https://thoughtcatalog.com/ryan-oconnell/2011/01/gregg-araki-gay-boys-aliens-and-shoegaze < https://thoughtcatalog.com/ryan-oconnell/2011/01/gregg-araki-gay-boys-aliens-and-shoegaze> . ↵

25. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*. ↵

26. Gregg Araki, *Totally F***ed Up* (Strand Releasing, 1993), 23:53. ↵

27. Araki, *Totally F***ed Up*, 1:16. ↵

28. Araki, *Totally F***ed Up*, 42:21. ↵

29. Cover, "Isolated and Suicidal," 195. ↵

30. Araki, *Totally F***ed Up*, 18:15. ↵

31. I would like to emphasize that this phrasing is not intended to glorify suicide, but rather to situate Andy's own mentality prior to him taking his life. ↵

32.  The increase in representation is a point of contention within the community. Some argue that the increase in representation is positive for the community, while others argue these representations commodify queer identity. Regardless, there has been an increasing number of mainstream queer films. ↵

33. Thomas Bezucha, *Big Eden* (Wolfe Video, 2000), 01:32:20. ↵

34. Bezucha, *Big Eden*, 01:32:55. ↵

35.  Dunye, *The Watermelon Woman*, 1:14:14. ↵

36.  For more information, see Deepa Shivaram, "More Republican Leaders Try to Ban Books on Race, LGBTQ Issues," *NPR*, November 13, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/11/13/1055524205/more-republican-leaders-try-to-ban-books-on-race-lgbtq-issues < https://www.npr.org/2021/11/13/1055524205/more-republican-leaders-try-to-ban-books-on-race-lgbtq-issues> . ↵

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# Author Information

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Nathan Burns (they/he) is an incoming MA student in Sexuality Studies at San Francisco State University. Their research revolves around queer, trans, and disabled life and cultural production, particularly in relationship to community, digital spaces, and popular culture. Nathan has also been named a 2022–23 California State University Sally Casanova Pre-Doctoral Scholar.

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